

# JUNGLE ISLAND

## An Open Letter to the Community

To our friends, neighbors and the tax payers of the City of Miami and Miami-Dade County:

Almost twenty years ago, when I was presented with the opportunity to relocate Parrot Jungle onto a deserted parcel of land known as Watson Island, it was difficult for me to envision the lush, tropical setting I knew was needed for the attraction to flourish. There were literally two trees on the property.

But, when I thought about the opportunities such a central location would provide, I was sold on the idea. Relocating to the heart of Miami would bring the park closer to everyone in our community -- thousands more school kids, countless more local families, the business community, and of course, the tourists who vacation on nearby Miami Beach. For the first time, we would be able to offer the millions of visitors that come through the center of this city a family-oriented alternative. And we have done just that.

Today's Jungle Island has seen its annual attendance increase 73% over the previous location and total yearly revenue has leapt 350% over the old park's revenue. The old park had 35 employees; Jungle Island employs over 600. The old park hosted 50 events per year; Jungle Island hosts more than 1,300 events annually, many of which have collectively raised tens of millions of dollars for charities. Jungle Island has 25,000 annual pass holders. Jungle Island offers free admission to all military personnel, police officers, school teachers, firefighters and EMTs. Plus, Jungle Island donates over \$600,000 worth of tickets per year to help raise money for charities.

The journey from the old park to Watson Island has not been without its challenges. From 9/11, to hurricanes, to the great recession, to the tunnel project, we have faced many headwinds in our diligent attempts to meet the original attendance and revenue figures we were advised would be achievable.

The structure of the \$25 million HUD loan that helped fund the construction of the park has been a major hurdle. Since the park's opening, we have worked closely with the City of Miami and Miami-Dade County to restructure the debt so that Jungle Island can responsibly meet all of its obligations. Over the past year and a half, we have been working on a viable solution that would achieve everyone's objectives.

While we are still working to finalize that solution with the City of Miami, in the interest of setting the record straight throughout this process, I thought it prudent and appropriate to inform our community that Jungle Island has been a very responsible party within this public-private partnership. To date, we have paid:

- \$11.3 million in first mortgage debt repayment that the City and County would have otherwise had to pay the lender
- Over \$8 million in sales taxes
- \$5.5 million in property taxes to the City, County, State and Miami-Dade County Public Schools
- \$3.6 million in rent to the City of Miami
- \$750,000 in interest payments on the HUD loan
- \$456,000 in parking surcharges to the City of Miami

And, most importantly, we have paid over \$44 million in employee salaries and benefits to date. Since we opened Jungle Island in its new location, we have hired a myriad of people who live in the Enterprise Zone, the Empowerment Zone and from middle- and low-income families. We have provided these hard-working members of our community with the training and experience necessary to advance to better opportunities. Many have been with us for literally decades.

In response to the baseless insinuation by some within a recent Miami Herald article that I am personally funneling money out of this project, I would like to offer a few accurate facts to convey that this is far from the truth. To begin with, my partner and I have personally invested \$21.8 million into the park, which is verified by independent auditors. Because I am often working in the park with animals, I am required to take a salary so I can be covered by worker's compensation. My annual salary for my regular seven-day work week amounts to just \$10,000 per year.

As you can plainly see, this is not a money-making venture for me; it is a labor of love. I remember when my parents took me to the old park for the first time in 1952. It inspired me to commit my career to animals, becoming a veterinarian and working with thousands of animals over the years. While this project has proved more challenging than any other venture I have ever encountered, knowing that I have helped others develop a deeper appreciation for animals, plants, and nature makes it all worthwhile.

I am sincere when I say that I am grateful for the opportunities this community has afforded me, and every day I work hard to give back. It is my genuine hope that we can achieve a viable solution with the City of Miami and Miami-Dade County so that Jungle Island can continue to serve this community -- a place we all proudly call home.

Thank you for your time.

With appreciation,



Bern Levine, DVM  
Jungle Island